

[A Merchant Wizard]

No. 1

Approximately 3,200 words

83 C [Revises by Autta?] SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A MERCHANT WIZARD

Date of First Writing March 6, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed William M. Perry

Fictitious Name John Randall

Street Address 2200 Divine Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Merchant

Name of Writer Stiles M. Scruggs

Name of Reviser State Office

“Pretty fair scene to have started from an accidental shoe string, and John Randall's eyes roved contentedly over the fifty-six men and women busily working in his air-conditioned, well-lighted office. “Yep, it all started back in 1899, when I was a volunteer fireman.

Library of Congress

One night the court house was destroyed by fire, and I didn't know about it until the next morning. You see, the fire station was about a mile from where I lived.

"I was disappointed by missing the fire, so I got busy looking for a C10 - S.C. - 1/31/41

2

remedy. I begin to collect old wire and a bell, and, with my own hands, I strung that wire from the fire station to my house. Whenever an alarm was sounded at the station, my bell rang, and I never missed another fire.

"That home-made wire alarm attracted so much attention that I decided to quit my job and go into the electrical business. You see, back in those days, salaries weren't at all high. Then I was thirty-one years old and was making only \$40 a month.

"But to start at the beginning. I was born in 1872, on a farm near Cottageville, Colleton County, South Carolina. My parents were Newman Randall and Margaret (Heyward) Randall. They moved to Columbia in 1874, when I was two years old. Father came here as marshal at the University of South Carolina. During his seven years in that role, he won a law degree. In later years, he practiced law in Columbia.

"My first big thrill came when, at the age of four, I saw Hampton's Red Shirts fall into line and march to the State House in 1876. We lived close to the Wallace House, at that time. Fast stepping, smartly dressed soldiers have always given me a thrill, and I guess that is why I have taken interest in good shooting and other out-of-door sports.

"My schooling was cut short during my youth, because of political discord and confused social conditions, and it took pretty hard scratching in those days to get by. I first became a pupil of the Clarkson Private school at 1118 Lady Street, and later, in 1883, I finished the eighth grade in the public school. That's the sum total of my schooling. One year when I was in Ohio, some friends asked me what college I had finished in. When I told them

Library of Congress

the truth, they were amazed. What education I have above the eighth grade has been acquired in the school of experience.

3

"In 1885, I got my first job as a clerk in R. C. Davis' Racket Store. The racket store, you know, was the predecessor of the modern five-and-ten-cent store. One could buy anything from a tin cup to a paper of pins, and get it cheap. The pay there was low. I started at five dollars a week. I worked there two years and was drawing only seven dollars and fifty cents when I left there to start work at the McCrory store at ten dollars a week.

"That low scale of pay caused me to devote my leisure hours in search of a better job. One day I was lucky, and soon was working for Uncle Sam, as a special delivery messenger in the Columbia Post Office. I went to work there in 1888, and by 1890 I was superintendent of carriers. Although I was earning more than I had ever earned, I was not content, because I realized there was not a very bright future in post office jobs.

"The fact that I had blazed an alluring opening, through my home-made electric alarm, for a new sort of work, with a future to it, was not lost sight of by me. The very people who had poked fun at me during the construction of the alarm now came around to pat me on the shoulder and offer to pay me to perform similar services for them. While holding on to my post office job, I put in my spare time in electrical experiments and tested the possibilities of the potential electrical game.

"In 1903, when the paid fire department was established, I declined membership. I also quit my post office service late that year and established headquarters in electrical fixtures in a tiny room in a building where the Arcade building now stands. The rental for that room was three dollars a week, but I was clearing approximately as much money as I had earned when I was at the post office.

"The electrical business boomed throughout 1903 and the first quarter 4 of 1904. By the end of 1904, I had established an electrical company. The company rented quarters in

Library of Congress

the Berkley building. There I was paying wages to thirty-two men and women employees. You know prosperity and panic are so close together that a business man may start out with prosperity and, like as not, walk a mile with panic before he discovers a change of companions.

"In 1906, an economic dip came along, and it had set in good before I noticed it. As it was, it gave me some sleepless nights and many prayerful days. The wall faced me, if my creditors should draw on me. I appealed to an old friend / who could afford to aid me. And he told me to sit tight and hold on and he would come to my aid if they forced my hand. You know they didn't press me at all after I told them they could have the money, though it would be a sacrifice on my part. It reminds me of the old song, 'When You Get What You Want, You Don't Want It.' I thus met the economic dip and rode up the road until the bottom fell out of the financial barrel again in 1914. That year, the war in Europe shut off American exports. Business all over the South slumped fearfully. Cotton didn't move. And since that product is the money crop of the South, collections were practically nil. My business again hovered between life and death for months.

"I knew if I failed in 1914, all my struggle from the start would be in vain. I sought out an old friend, who was then in the banking business and was known as a financial wizard. He listened to me carefully and asked me to bring him my audit reports. I did so, and he authorized me to draw on him to the extent of \$25,000, if need be. Again that aid saved me, without the actual passing of much money.

"An economic panic is like an earthquake. It hits all alike. A business firm, particularly without a reserve fund, is bound to suffer at every whim of 5 economic dips. Up to 1915, my store had no reserve. In 1916, through the aid of friends, I bought out the interest of M. L. Mann and began at the same time to put by a reserve fund for future eventualities and emergencies. The reserve aided me wonderfully when periods of business slackness came along. And, I'm telling you, upsets in economic affairs are about as certain to happen over the years as death and taxes.

Library of Congress

"However, our reserve fund was soon exhausted, / when the so-called depression of 1929 hit the whole world such a calamitous blow that it has not yet fully recovered from the shock. When money takes a nose dive, people get scared, and panic jumps into the saddle. Our store was on a limb again in 1932, and for some years following. People who needed our products, and could have paid for them, / were afraid to buy, while the great rank and file of our customers were not financially able to buy what they actually needed.

"It took many strong pulls to play even for some years, because my overhead expense was about the same, and trade was cut down fully fifty percent. My anxiety was increased because I was loath to reduce the number of my employees. I had to let out a few. The other business houses also faced the same predicament, and that turned loose the millions of unemployed in the United States. As 1935 dawned, however, my store was stabilized and I was able to reemploy those I had dropped, by taking a pay cut in profits all around.

"Since 1935, with the Government earnestly striving to aid, our customers gradually got their feet on the ground, and we pressed on. In 1938, this store, which began in a cubbyhole approximately forty years ago, and with a three-dollar rental, is occupying it's own \$12,000 building. It is paying fifty-six men and women good salaries, five of them \$6,000 a year. My income for 1938 was approximately \$32,000, and I paid slightly more than \$4,000 in Federal income taxes. I believe South Carolina has seen the worst of the depression. And our outlook for 1939, so far, gives us reason to hope that we may do even better this year than we did in 1938.

"At a mass meeting in Columbia, I was unanimously chosen president of the Richland County Federal Relief organization. The man who put me in nomination paid me this tribute: 'Mr, Randall has done more public welfare work, without pay, than any other man in the city.' Whether that statement is so or not, I have never neglected a chance to serve

Library of Congress

the people; nor have I forgotten that a citizen should serve his community when he sees a chance to aid in making it a better place in which to live.

“It was love for my fellow man that motivated me to teach the Columbia police and State patrolmen how to use firearms efficiently. I mastered the shooting game myself, and it is a pleasure to me to instruct others. When, at first practice, / I put four out of five shots in the bull's-eyes, / the police showed interest. And when I did about as well with a revolver as I did with a rifle, they cheered.

“The War Department pays the expenses of sharpshooters for two weeks at Camp Perry, Ohio, and I take a number of good marksmen there during the National Rifle Matches. I try out the applicants who wish to go to the matches, and if one fails to put three out of every five shots in the bull's-eye, he doesn't make the grade. A great number of excellent shooters gather at Camp Perry every year. I think it was due to my ability and interest in these events there that caused the trustees to bestow on me the rank of captain. It was due to similar interest in the Boy Scout movement that caused the National organization to honor me with the Silver Beaver trophy.

7

“I am a member of Masonic bodies and the Shrine Club, the Knights of Pythias, the Odd Fellows, and the Elks. I give these orders a great deal of my time in coaching applicants, and contribute to them when they need funds. I also serve my church faithfully, having served as Senior Warden at the Church of the Good Shepherd, which is the highest title bestowed on a layman.

“My domestic and social life has been full and, for the most part, very happy. I was married to Miss Juanita Frost in 1890, at Wilmington, North Carolina. We had five daughters and one son, John L. Randall, who is now the vice president of the store. The daughters are married. Today I have nine grandchildren. Mrs. Randall died in 1930. In 1934, I was married a second time, to Mrs. Guy Mason, of Columbia. We reside at 2200 Divine Street,

Library of Congress

Columbia. That is the first and only home I have lived in since 1890, when I married the first time.

“Some one has said that life is a dream, and we know not when we sleep or when we wake, which is equal to saying that no oasis has been reached by me without a struggle, sweat, and anxiety. To have won a little success in a work-a-day world, which has been topsy-turvy a great deal of the time, is a great pleasure to me.”

AGG